

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *Nickel and Dime*

Author: Barbara Ehrenreich

Barbara Ehrenreich is the author of *Nickel and Dime*, *Blood Rites*, *The Worst Years of Our Lives*, a *New York Times* bestseller, *Fear of Falling*, nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award, and eight other books. A frequent contributor to *Time*, *Harper's*, *Esquire*, *The New Republic*, *Mirabella*, *The Nation*, and *The New York Times Magazine*, she lives near Key West, Florida.

Name: Barbara Ehrenreich

Born: 1941, Butte, MT

Education: Reed College, B.A., 1963; Rockefeller University, Ph.D., 1968.

Politics: "Socialist and feminist"



Career:

Health Policy Advisory Center, New York, NY, staff member, 1969-71; State University of New York College at Old Westbury, assistant professor of health sciences, 1971-74; writer, 1974-; *Seven Days* magazine, editor, 1974-; *Mother Jones* magazine, columnist, 1986-89; *Time* magazine, essayist, 1990; *Guardian*, London, England, columnist, 1992-. New York Institute for the Humanities, associate fellow, 1980-; Institute for Policy Studies, fellow, 1982-. Co-chair, Democratic Socialists of America, 1983-.

Awards:

National Magazine award, 1980; Ford Foundation award for Humanistic Perspectives on Contemporary Issues, 1981; Guggenheim fellowship, 1987; Christopher Award and Los Angeles Times Book Award in current interest category, both 2002, both for *Nickel and Dime*: On (Not) Getting by in America; 2004 Puffin/Nation Prize.

Past Works:

Long March, Short Spring: The Student Uprising at Home and Abroad (with John Ehrenreich), Monthly Review Press, New York, NY, 1969.

The American Health Empire: Power, Profits, and Politics: A Report from the Health Policy Advisory Center (with John Ehrenreich), Random House, New York, NY, 1970.

Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers (with Deirdre English), Feminist Press, Old Westbury, NY, 1972.

Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness (with Deirdre English), Feminist Press, 1973.

For Her Own Good: One Hundred Fifty Years of the Experts' Advice to Women (with Deirdre English), Doubleday, New York, NY, 1978.

The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment, Doubleday (New York, NY), 1983.

Women in the Global Factory (pamphlet, with Annette Fuentes), South End Press, Boston, MA, 1983.

Poverty in the American Dream: Women & Children First (coauthor), Institute for New Communications, South End Press, Boston, MA, 1983.

Re-making Love: The Feminization of Sex (with Elizabeth Hess and Gloria Jacobs), Anchor Press/Doubleday, New York, NY, 1986.

The Mean Season: An Attack on the Welfare State (with Fred Block, Richard Cloward, and Frances Fox Piven), Pantheon, New York, NY, 1987.



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Past Works: (Continued)

Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class, Pantheon, New York, NY, 1989.

The Worst Years of Our Lives: Irreverent Notes from a Decade of Greed, Pantheon, 1990.

Kipper's Game, Farrar, Straus, New York, NY, 1993.

The Snarling Citizen: Essays, Farrar, Straus, New York, NY, 1995.

Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War, Metropolitan Books, New York, NY, 1997.

Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America, Holt, New York, NY, 2001.

Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy, Metropolitan Books, New York, NY, 2003.

Contributor to magazines, including Radical America, Nation, Esquire, Vogue, New Republic, and New York Times Magazine. Contributing editor, Ms., 1981-, and Mother Jones, 1988-.

Media Adaptations:

"Wage Slaves: Not Getting by in America," a segment of the A&E series Investigative Reports, was based in part on Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America and aired August 26, 2002.

Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2004.

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Sidelights:

An outspoken feminist and socialist party leader, Barbara Ehrenreich crusades for social justice in her books. Although many of her early works were shaped by her formal scientific training—she earned a Ph.D. in biology—her later works have moved beyond health care concerns to the plight of women and the poor. In addition to her numerous nonfiction books, Ehrenreich is widely known for her weekly columns in *Time* and *The Guardian*.

Early in her career, while working for the Health Policy Advisory Center, Ehrenreich published a scathing critique of the American health “empire,” exposing its inefficiency, inhumanity, and self-serving policies. Then, turning from the population in general to women in particular, Ehrenreich and her co-author Deirdre English unveiled the male domination of the female health care system in *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness and For Her Own Good: One Hundred Fifty Years of the Experts’ Advice to Women*. In a controversial work, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*, Ehrenreich takes on the whole male establishment, challenging the assumption that feminism is at the root of America’s domestic upheaval.

Describing *The Hearts of Men* as a study of “the ideology that shaped the breadwinner ethic,” Ehrenreich surveys the three decades between the 1950s and the 1980s, showing how male commitment to home and family collapsed during this time. “The result,” according to *New York Times* contributor Eva Hoffman, “is an original work of cultural iconography that supplements—and often stands on its head—much of the analysis of the relations between the sexes that has become the accepted wisdom of recent years.” Ehrenreich’s interpretation of the evidence led her to the surprising conclusion that anti-feminism evolved not in response to feminism—but to men’s abdication of their breadwinner role.

The seeds of male revolt were planted as far back as the 1950s, according to Ehrenreich, when what she calls “the gray flannel dissidents” began to balk at their myriad responsibilities. “The gray flannel nightmare of the commuter train and the constant pressure to support a houseful of consumers caused many men to want to run away from it all,” Carol Cleaver wrote in the *New Leader*. What held these men in check, says Ehrenreich, was the fear that, as bachelors, they would be associated with homosexuality. Hugh Hefner banished that stigma with the publication of *Playboy*, a magazine whose name alone “defied the convention of hard-won maturity,” Ehrenreich says in her book. “The magazine’s real message was not eroticism, but escape . . . from the bondage of breadwinning.”

In the decades that followed, men’s increasing “flight from commitment” was sanctioned by pop psychologists and other affiliates of the Human Potential Movement, who banished guilt and encouraged people to “do their own thing.” Unfortunately for women, Ehrenreich concludes that men abandoned the breadwinner role “without overcoming the sexist attitudes that role has perpetuated: on the one hand, the expectation of female nurturance and submissive service as a matter of right; on the other hand a misogynist contempt for women as ‘parasites’ and entrappers of men.” In response to male abdication, women increasingly adopted one of two philosophies: they became feminists, committed to achieving economic and social parity with men, or they became anti-feminists, who tried to keep men at home by binding themselves ever more tightly to them. Despite such efforts, Ehrenreich concludes that women have not fared well, but instead have found themselves increasingly on their own “in a society that never intended to admit us as independent persons, much less as breadwinners for others.”

Widely reviewed in both magazines and newspapers, *The Hearts of Men* was hailed for its provocative insights—even as individual sections of the study were soundly criticized. In her *Village Voice* review, for instance, Judith Levine was both appreciative of the work and skeptical of its conclusions: “Barbara Ehrenreich—one of the finest feminist-socialist writers around—has written a witty, intelligent book based on intriguing source material. *The Hearts of Men* says something that needs saying: men have not simply reacted to feminism—skulking away from women and children, hurt, humiliated, feeling cheated of their legal and

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Sidelights: (Continued)

emotional rights. Men, as Ehrenreich

observes, have, as always, done what they want to do. . . . I applaud her on-the-mark readings of Playboy, medical dogma, and men's liberation; her insistence that the wage system punishes women and children when families disintegrate; her mordant yet uncynical voice." But at the same time, Levine judged the central thesis of the book as "wrong": "When she claims that the glue of families is male volition and the breadwinner ideology—and that a change in that ideology caused the breakup of the family—I am doubtful," commented the critic. "The ideology supporting men's abdication of family commitment is not new. It has coexisted belligerently with the breadwinner ethic throughout American history."

In the 1986 *Re-making Love: The Feminization of Sex*, coauthored with Elizabeth Hess and Gloria Jacobs, Ehrenreich reports and applauds the freer attitudes towards sex that women adopted in the 1970s and 1980s. The authors assert that women have gained the ability to enjoy sex just for the sake of pleasure, separating it from idealistic notions of love and romance. In her review of *Re-making Love* for the *Chicago Tribune*, Joan Beck noted that the book "is an important summing up of what has happened to women and sex in the last two decades and [that it] shows why the sex revolution requires re-evaluation." Beck, however, argued that the authors ignore the "millions of walking wounded"—those affected by sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, or lack of lasting relationships. *Washington Post Book World* contributor Anthony Astrachan also expressed a wish for a deeper analysis, but nevertheless found *Re-making Love* "full of sharp and sometimes surprising insights that come from looking mass culture full in the face."

Ehrenreich's next work to attract critical notice, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, examines the American middle class and its attitudes towards people of the working and poorer classes. Jonathan Yardley stated in the *Washington Post* that what Ehrenreich actually focuses on is a class "composed of articulate, influential people. . . . in fact what most of us think of as the upper-middle class." According to Ehrenreich this group perceives itself as threatened, is most concerned with self-preservation, and has isolated itself—feeling little obligation to work for the betterment of society. This attitude, Ehrenreich maintains, is occurring at a time when the disparity in income between classes has reached the greatest point since World War II and has become "almost as perilously skewed as that of India," as Joseph Coates quoted from *Fear of Falling* in *Tribune Books*.

Globe and Mail contributor Maggie Helwig, though praising the book as "witty, clever, [and] perceptive," described as unrealistic Ehrenreich's hope for a future when everyone could belong to the professional middle class and hold fulfilling jobs. Similarly, David Rieff remarked in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* that Ehrenreich's proposed solutions to class polarization are overly optimistic and tend to romanticize the nature of work. "Nonetheless," Rieff concluded, "*Fear of Falling* is a major accomplishment, a breath of fresh thinking about a subject that very few writers have known how to think about at all." The book elicited even higher praise from Coates, who deemed it "a brilliant social analysis and intellectual history, quite possibly the best on this subject since Tocqueville's."

In *The Worst Years of Our Lives: Irreverent Notes from a Decade of Greed*, Ehrenreich discusses in a series of reprinted articles what some consider to be one of the most self-involved and consumeristic decades in American history: the 1980s. Most of these articles first appeared in *Mother Jones*, but some come from such periodicals as *Nation*, *Atlantic*, *New York Times*, and *New Republic*. Together, they summarize "what Ms. Ehrenreich sees as the decade's salient features: blathering ignorance, smug hypocrisy, institutionalized fraud and vengeful polarization—all too dangerous to be merely absurd," said H. Jack Geiger in the *New York Times Book Review*. "One of Mrs. Ehrenreich's main themes," observed *New York Times* reviewer Herbert Mitgang, "is that the Reagan Administration, which dominated the last decade, cosmeticized the country and painted over its true



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Sidelights: (Continued)

condition. The author writes that the poor and middle class are now suffering the results of deliberate neglect."

The Snarling Citizen: Essays collects fifty-seven previously published essays, most of which Ehrenreich contributed to *Time* and *The Guardian*. The essays once again reveal the author's passion for social justice and feminism. Although some reviewers take exception with Ehrenreich's opinions in these pieces, nearly all lavish praise on her well-honed writing style. Writing in the *Chicago Tribune Books*, for example, Penelope Mesic remarked that the pieces in *The Snarling Citizen* "startle and invigorate because those who espouse liberal causes—feminism, day care and a strong labor movement—all too often write a granola of prose: a mild, beige substance that is, in a dull way, good for us. Ehrenreich is peppery and salacious, bitter with scorn, hotly lucid." *Women's Review of Books* contributor Nan Levinson commended the author for her "writing, a hymn to pithiness and wit, and her ear, attuned to the ways in which language redefined becomes thought reconstructed and politics realigned." Andrew Ferguson, however, commenting in the *American Spectator*, took issue with what he called the author's habit of building entire essays around "casual misstatements" of fact. In addition, while conceding that Ehrenreich "knows that caricature can be a verbal art," Ferguson maintains that "too often her fondness for exaggeration and hyperbole drags her into mere buffoonery." While noting that the collection's pieces are all so similar in "size, . . . voice and essentially . . . subject" that they "resemble a box of Fig Newtons," Levinson declared: "Ehrenreich is a rare thing in American public life today—a freelance thinker."

In June 1998 Ehrenreich embarked on what was to become perhaps her best-known project. "I leave behind everything that normally soothes the ego and sustains the body--home, career, companion, reputation, ATM card," as she explained in a 1999 Harper's article, "and plunge into the low-wage workforce." Following up on such previous studies as *Fear of Falling*, Ehrenreich spent two years living the life of the American working class, and what she discovered turned into the bestselling 2001 expose, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*.

A successful, affluent, Ph.D. candidate, the author created a new persona—Barbara Ehrenreich, divorced homemaker with some housekeeping experience—and set off on a tour of the country attempting to sustain herself at what are commonly called "entry-level" jobs. In Ehrenreich's case, that meant waiting tables and cleaning hotel rooms in Key West, Florida; working at a nursing home in Portland, Maine; and becoming a Wal-Mart "associate" in Minneapolis. As she pointed out, Ehrenreich herself was not too far removed from the working class: her father was a copper miner, her husband a warehouse worker, and her sister an employee in the kind of low-wage jobs the author now was sampling. Nor did she harbor any illusions about her temporary status among the working class: "My aim is nothing so mistily subjective as to 'experience poverty' or find out how it 'really feels' to be a long-term low-wage worker," she asserted in Harper's. "And with all my real-life assets—bank account, IRA, health insurance, multiroom home—waiting indulgently in the background, I am, of course, thoroughly insulated from the terrors that afflict the genuinely poor."

As the author related in the Harper's piece that was expanded into *Nickel and Dimed*, "My first task is to find a place to live. I figure that if I can earn \$7 an hour--which, from the want ads, seems doable—I can afford to spend \$500 [per month] on rent." In affluent Key West, that amount might finance "flopouses and trailer homes," the latter of which featured "no air-conditioning, no screens, no fans, no television and, by way of diversion, only the challenge of evading the landlord's Doberman pinscher." But even that rent was \$675 per month—out of Ehrenreich's reach. "It is a shock to realize that 'trailer trash' has become, for me, a demographic category to aspire to."

Though she equipped herself with three essentials for her study--a car, a laptop computer, and \$1,300 startup funds—Ehrenreich quickly learned that earning money for the basics of life came much harder in the service sector. She discovered a booming trade in Key West's "hospitality industry" and noted that her demographic—



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Sidelights: (Continued)

white, female, English-speaking--gave her an advantage at hiring time. She initially dismissed such options as desk-clerking (too much standing), waitressing (too much walking), and telemarketing (wrong personality type).

That left Ehrenreich to fill out applications at hotels, supermarkets, inns and guest-houses. But her phone seldom rang. To the author's surprise, she learned that the larger chains often run continual help-wanted ads, even when no jobs were open, to build a candidate safety net against the constant turnover in the service field.

Ehrenreich finally landed at a small chain-hotel's restaurant, as a server. She doled out drinks, made salads and desserts, and tended to "side work," which she defines as "sweeping, scrubbing, slicing, refilling, and restocking." The break room, servers were informed by management, was not a right, but a privilege. Her wage came to \$5.15 per hour, not including tips that dried up with the summer heat. Ehrenreich realized she could not afford her \$500 efficiency apartment and must find a second job. She took a job at "Jerry's," her alias for a large, well-known family restaurant chain. If anything, the conditions were even worse: "The break room typifies the whole situation: there is none, because there are no breaks at Jerry's. For six to eight hours in a row, you never sit except to pee." She later landed what she considered a dream job of housekeeping in a hotel: stripping beds, scrubbing bathrooms and handling giant vacuum cleaners on four-hour, no-break shifts. A month working in Key West netted Ehrenreich approximately \$1,040; after expenses she was left with \$22, and had no health insurance.

"How former welfare recipients and single mothers will (and do) survive in the low-wage workforce, I cannot imagine," Ehrenreich wrote. This comment is a running theme of *Nickel and Dimed*, as the jobs the author described are typical of those taken by the some twelve-million women who are the objects of welfare reform, "workfare," or other such governmental policies. To *Salon* reviewer Laura Miller, "one of the sly pleasures of '*Nickel and Dimed*' is the way it dances on the line between straightforward social protest and an edgier acknowledgment of inconvenient truths."

Other critical reaction to Ehrenreich's book ranged from skeptical to admiring. In the former camp was Julia Klein, whose question in *American Prospect* was, "In the end, what has [Ehrenreich] accomplished? It's no shock that the dollars don't add up; that affordable housing is hard, if not impossible, to find; and that taking a second job is a virtual necessity for many of the working poor." After labeling the author "a prickly, self-confident woman and the possessor of a righteous, ideologically informed outrage at America's class system that can turn patronizing at times," Klein went on to acknowledge that *Nickel and Dimed* is still "a compelling and timely book whose insights sometimes do transcend the obvious." Similarly, *Humanist* contributor Joni Scott mentioned an early reluctance to read the memoirs of an affluent person living temporarily as poor, but found that Ehrenreich's work is "an important literary contribution and a call to action that I hope is answered. I believe this book should be required reading for corporate executives and politicians." "This book opens one's eyes very wide indeed," declared a reviewer for *M2 Best Books*. And in the view of Bob Hulteen of *Sojourners*, "Definitional books come around about once a decade. Such books so describe the reality of the age in simple terms that the impact is felt from after-dinner conversations to federal policy discussions." *Nickel and Dimed*, he added, "will likely join this pantheon."

Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2004.



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Further Reading:

Periodicals:

American Prospect, July 30, 2001, Julia Klein, review of Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America, p. 43.
American Spectator, August, 1995, Andrew Ferguson, review of The Snarling Citizen: Essays, p. 66.
Armed Forces & Society, fall, 1999, Daniel Moran, review of Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War, p. 111.
Booklist, March 15, 1998, review of Blood Rites, p. 1209; April 1, 2001, George Cohen, review of Nickel and Dimed, p. 43.
Barron's, August 6, 2001, review of Nickel and Dimed, p. 37.
Business Week, May 28, 2001, review of Nickel and Dimed, p. 24; December 10, 2001, review of Nickel and Dimed, p. 22.
Chicago Tribune, September 25, 1986, Joan Beck, review of Re-making Love; The Feminization of Sex.
Christian Century, August 1, 2001, Lillian Daniel, review of Nickel and Dimed, p. 30.
Christian Science Monitor, July 12, 2001, review of Nickel and Dimed, p. 17; November 15, 2001, review of Nickel and Dimed, p. 14.
Dissent, fall, 2001, review of Nickel and Dimed, p. 131.
Entertainment Weekly, May 29, 1998, review of Blood Rites, p. 69; December 21, 2001, review of Nickel and Dimed, p. 132.
Foreign Affairs, March, 1998, review of Blood Rites, p. 146.
Globe and Mail (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), August 26, 1989, Maggie Helwig, review of Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class.
Harper's, January, 1999, Barbara Ehrenreich, "Nickel and Dimed" (precursor to the book), p. 107.
Harvard Business Review, January, 2002, review of Nickel and Dimed, p. 107.
Humanist, January-February, 1992, p. 11; November, 1998, Edd Doerr, review of Blood Rites, p. 47; September, 2001, Joni Scott, review of Nickel and Dimed, p. 40.
International Journal on World Peace, December, 1998, Gordon Anderson, review of Blood Rites, p. 111.
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Journal of Peace Research, September, 1999, review of Blood Rites, p. 611.
Kirkus Reviews, April 1, 2001, review of Nickel and Dimed, p. 475.
Library Journal, May 1, 2001, review of Nickel and Dimed, p. 115.
Long Island Business News, July 19, 2002, review of Nickel and Dimed, p. 25A.
Los Angeles Times, July 24, 1983; June 15, 2001, David Ulin, "Life at the Bottom of the Food Chain, " p. E1.
Los Angeles Times Book Review, August 20, 1989, David Rieff, review of Fear of Falling; May 27, 2001, review of Nickel and Dimed, p. 4; December 2, 2001, review of Nickel and Dimed, p. 24.
M2 Best Books, May 2, 2002, review of Nickel and Dimed.
Marine Corps Gazette, August, 1998, review of Blood Rites, p. 73.
Ms., May-June, 1995, p. 75; April-May, 2001, Vivien Labaton, review of Nickel and Dimed, p. 88.
Nation, December 24, 1983.
Naval War College Review, autumn, 1998, review of Blood Rites, p. 157.
New Leader, July 11, 1983, Carol Cleaver, review of The Hearts of Men.
New Republic, July 11, 1983.
New Statesman & Society, May 17, 1991, p. 37, May 20, 1994, Vicky Hutchings, review of Kipper's Game, p. 37.
Newsweek, June 4, 2001, review of Nickel and Dimed, p. 57.
New York Review of Books, July 1, 1971.
New York Times, January 20, 1971; August 16, 1983, Eva Hoffman, review of The Hearts of Men; May 16, 1990, Herbert Mitgang, review of The Worst Years of Our Lives: Irreverent Notes from a Decade of Greed; July 13, 1993, p. C18; July 30, 2001, Bob Herbert, "Unmasking the Poor, " p. A21.



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Further Reading: (Continued)

New York Times Book Review, March 7, 1971; June 5, 1983; August 6, 1989; May 20, 1990, H. Jack Geiger, review of *The Worst Years of Our Lives*; August 8, 1993, p. 18; May 28, 1996, p. 12; June 14, 1998, review of *Blood Rites*, p. 32; May 13, 2001, Dorothy Gallagher, "Making Ends Meet," p. 10; May 20, 2001, review of *Nickel and Dimed*, p. 67; June 3, 2001, review of *Nickel and Dimed*, p. 30.

New York Times Magazine, June 26, 1996, p. 28.

Observer (London, England), October 11, 1998, review of *Blood Rites*, p. 16.

Progressive, January, 1995, p. 47; February, 1995, p. 34; January, 2002, review of *Nickel and Dimed*, p. 42.

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Publishers Weekly, July 26, 1993, p. 46; May 14, 2001, review of *Nickel and Dimed*, p. 67.

Readings, September, 2001, review of *Nickel and Dimed*, p. 33.

Reference & User Services Quarterly, spring, 1998, review of *Blood Rites*, p. 274.

School Library Journal, December, 2001, Barbara Genco, review of *Nickel and Dimed*, p. 57.

Social Service Review, March, 2002, review of *Nickel and Dimed*, p. 196.

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Washington Post, August 23, 1989, Jonathan Yardley, review of *Fear of Falling*; June 10, 2001, Katherine Newman, "Desperate Hours," p. T03.

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Whole Earth Review, winter, 1995, p. 86.

Women's Review of Books, October, 1995, Nan Levinson, review of *The Snarling Citizen*, p. 25; July, 2001, Jacqueline Jones, review of *Nickel and Dimed*, p. 5, author interview, p. 6.

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Onion A.V. Club, <http://www.theonion.com/> (September 19, 2001), Noel Murray, author interview.

Salon, <http://www.salon.com/> (May 9, 2001), Laura Miller, review of *Nickel and Dimed*.

Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2004.



Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *Nickel and Dimed*

About This Guide:

No matter which tax bracket you're in, you have a stake in the issues raised by Barbara Ehrenreich. A book that has changed assumptions about American prosperity and hardship, *Nickel and Dimed* makes an especially compelling selection for reading groups. The questions that follow are designed to enhance your personal understanding or group discussion of this provocative, heartfelt—and funny—account of life in the low-wage trenches.

About This Book:

The *New York Times* bestseller, and one of the most talked about books of the year, *Nickel and Dimed* has already become a classic of undercover reportage.

Millions of Americans work for poverty-level wages, and one day Barbara Ehrenreich decided to join them. She was inspired in part by the rhetoric surrounding welfare reform, which promised that any job equals a better life. But how can anyone survive, let alone prosper, on \$6 to \$7 an hour? To find out, Ehrenreich moved from Florida to Maine to Minnesota, taking the cheapest lodgings available and accepting work as a waitress, hotel maid, house cleaner, nursing-home aide, and Wal-Mart salesperson. She soon discovered that even the “lowliest” occupations require exhausting mental and physical efforts. And one job is not enough; you need at least two if you intend to live indoors.

Nickel and Dimed reveals low-wage America in all its tenacity, anxiety, and surprising generosity—a land of Big Boxes, fast food, and a thousand desperate strategies for survival. Instantly acclaimed for its insight, humor, and passion, this book is changing the way America perceives its working poor.

Discussion Questions:

Reading Guide from Henry Holt

<http://www.henryholt.com/readingguides/ehrenreich.htm>

1. In the wake of recent welfare reform measures, millions of women entering the workforce can expect to face struggles like the ones Ehrenreich confronted in *Nickel and Dimed*.

Have you ever been homeless, unemployed, without health insurance, or held down two jobs? What is the lowest-paying job you ever held and what kind of help—if any—did you need to improve your situation?

2. Were your perceptions of blue-collar Americans transformed or reinforced by *Nickel and Dimed*? Have your notions of poverty and prosperity changed since reading the book? What about your own treatment of waiters, maids, and sales-people?

3. How do booming national and international chains—restaurants, hotels, retail outlets, cleaning services, and elder-care facilities—affect the treatment and aspirations of low-wage workers? Consider how market competition and the push for profits drive the nickel-and-diming of America's lowest-paid.



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Discussion Questions (Continued):

4. Housing costs pose the greatest obstacle for low-wage workers. Why does our society seem to resist rectifying this situation? Do you believe that there are realistic solutions to the lack of affordable housing?
5. While working for The Maids, Ehrenreich hears Ted claim that he's "not a bad guy . . . and cares a lot about his girls." How do the assumptions of supervisors such as Ted affect their employees? How does Ted compare to Ehrenreich's other bosses? To yours?
6. Ehrenreich is white and middle class. She asserts that her experience would have been radically different had she been a person of color or a single parent. Do you think discrimination shaped Ehrenreich's story? In what ways?
7. Ehrenreich found that she could not survive on \$7.00 per hour -- not if she wanted to live indoors. Consider how her experiment would have played out in your community: limiting yourself to \$7.00 per hour earnings, create a hypothetical monthly budget for your part of the country.
8. Ehrenreich experienced remarkable goodwill, generosity, and solidarity among her colleagues. Does this surprise you? How do you think your own colleagues measure up?
9. Why do you think low-wage workers are reluctant to form labor organizations as Ehrenreich discovered at Wal-Mart? How do you think employees should lobby to improve working conditions?
10. Many campus and advocacy groups are currently involved in struggles for a "living wage." How do you think a living wage should be calculated?
11. Were you surprised by the casual reactions of Ehrenreich's coworkers when she revealed herself as an undercover writer? Were you surprised that she wasn't suspected of being "different" or out-of-place despite her graduate-level education and usually comfortable lifestyle?
12. How does managers' scrutiny—"time theft" crackdowns and drug testing—affect workers' morale? How can American companies make the workplace environment safe and efficient without treating employees like suspected criminals?
13. Ehrenreich concluded that had her working life been spent in a Wal-Mart—like environment, she would have emerged a different person—meaner, pettier, "Barb" instead of "Barbara." How would your personality change if you were placed in working conditions very different from the ones you are in now?
14. The workers in *Nickel and Dimed* receive almost no benefits -- no overtime pay, no retirement funds, and no health insurance. Is this fair? Do you think an increase in salary would redress the lack of benefits, or is this a completely separate problem?
15. Many of Ehrenreich's colleagues relied heavily on family—for housing and help with child-care, by sharing appliances and dividing up the cooking, shopping, and cleaning. Do you think Americans make excessive demands on the family unit rather than calling for the government to help those in need?
16. *Nickel and Dimed* takes place in 1998-2000, a time of unprecedented prosperity in America. Do you think Ehrenreich's experience would be different in today's economy? How so?



Book: Nickel and Dimed (2)

Discussion Questions: (Continued)

17. After reading *Nickel and Dimed*, do you think that having a job—any job—is better than no job at all? Did this book make you feel angry? Better informed? Relieved that someone has finally described your experience? Galvanized to do something?

Nickel and Dimed Study Guide from Northern Arizona University
http://www2.nau.edu/~d-ugstdy/_source/docs/Summer_Study_Guide2004.pdf

1. Early in her book *Nickel and Dimed*, author Barbara Ehrenreich admits that she has many advantages over “real” low-wage workers. What sets her apart from the average low-wage worker? In her desire to “experience poverty,” what rules does she set for herself?
2. Minimum wage workers often report feeling invisible. Where do you encounter minimum wage workers? What sorts of services do they provide? Have you ever worked in a low-wage job? If so, what was your experience?
3. On page 27, Ehrenreich writes: “There are no secret economies that nourish the poor; on the contrary, there are a host of special costs.” Describe some of these costs. How do the people in *Nickel and Dimed* deal with these costs?
4. Most of the low-income workers Ehrenreich encounters are women. Is there a connection between “women’s work” and low wages? Explain some of the social and historical reasons for this situation.
5. The Poverty Guideline is issued each year by the Department of Health and Human Services. In 2004, HHS found that for a family of four to live above the poverty line, they had to earn \$18,850. Describe life in your hometown for a family of four living just above the poverty line. Where would they live? Work? What would they eat? What daily challenges would they face?
6. Make a list privileges you experience as a person of your “class.” Make a list of drawbacks. How would you characterize your relationship to the American Dream? Do your goals seem achievable?
7. As a reader, we get to know many of Ehrenreich’s coworkers. Why does the author use personal narratives in *Nickel and Dimed*? Choose one person’s story to examine. What about the story surprises you?
8. Ehrenreich reports at length about the sorts of physical ailments low-wage workers have to endure. What are they? How are they dealt with?
9. “It is common, among the nonpoor,” writes Ehrenreich, “to think of poverty as a sustainable condition. They are ‘always with us.’ What is harder for the nonpoor to see is poverty as acute distress,” due to poor nutrition, homelessness and lack of affordable housing, injuries, and little to no health insurance. Ehrenreich argues that far from being sustainable, poverty is a “state of emergency.” Do you agree?
10. In the “Evaluation” chapter of *Nickel and Dimed*, Ehrenreich discusses the personal and social challenges of “achieving a decent fit between income and expenses.” What are some of these challenges? What solutions would you propose?



Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *Nickel and Dimed*

Reviews:

Praise for *Nickel and Dimed*

"Jarring, full of riveting grit . . . This book is already unforgettable." --Susannah Meadows, Newsweek

"Valuable and illuminating . . . We have Barbara Ehrenreich to thank for bringing us the news of America's working poor so clearly and directly, and conveying with it a deep moral outrage. . . . She is our premier reporter of the underside of capitalism." —Dorothy Gallagher, The New York Times Book Review

"impassioned, fascinating, profoundly significant, and wildly entertaining . . . I kept grabbing family members and phoning friends to read passages aloud." —Francine Pose, O: The Oprah Magazine

". . . you will read this explosive little book cover to cover and pass it on to all your friends and relatives." —Diana Henriques, The New York Times [Business Section]

"Angry, amusing . . . An in-your-face expose." —Anne Colamosca, Business Week

"With grace and wit, Ehrenreich discovers . . . the irony of being nickel and dimed during unprecedented prosperity." —Eileen Boris, The Boston Globe

"Ehrenreich is a superb and relaxed stylist [with] a tremendous sense of rueful humor." —Stephen Metcalf, Los Angeles Times Book Review

"Reading Ehrenreich is good for the soul." —Molly Ivins

"Ehrenreich is passionate, public, hotly lucid, and politically engaged." —Chicago Tribune

"Ehrenreich's scorn withers, her humor stings, and her radical light shines on." —The Boston Globe

"Barbara Ehrenreich is smart, provocative, funny, and sane in a world that needs more of all four." —Diane Sawyer